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**Smartphones: *Addiction*, or Way of Life?**

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### **Abstract**

Due to the widespread popularity and seeming dependence on smartphones, especially by millennials and post-millennials, many parents, teachers, and even medical professionals have expressed concern that an entire generation may be addicted to these devices and the various social media to which they provide access. Sociologically, however, it may be more insightful to apply some of the well-established theories related to social change and adaptation to technology, to describe, analyze, and better explain the massive popularity and widespread use of this particular phenomenon as a way of life and its impact on human behavior, social interaction, culture, and society.

**Key Terms:** Cell Phones; Smartphones; Addiction; Technology; Social Change

## Introduction

Look around. In restaurants, on the subway, in the classroom, in automobiles, and even in places where their use is discouraged or strictly forbidden, count the number of people staring at, talking into, or texting on their smartphones. The widespread fascination with and use of this form of technology is much more than a passing fad or frivolous activity likely to go the way of the hula hoop, pet rock, or fidget spinner. Rather, smartphone use has become a routine way of life for a large segment of the population. Smartphones and some derivative thereof have become and will most likely remain a significant aspect of both material and normative culture as they evolve into even more powerful and convenient forms of everyday technology. Moreover, they have had tremendous impact on the way people, especially younger Americans conduct their daily lives. Psychologists, Jean Twenge, a noted scholar who has researched generational differences among the so-called “Greatest Generation,” “Baby Boomers,” “Generation X,” “Millennials,” and “Post-millennials” (which she calls “iGen”), asserts that analyzing data from the 1930s to the present, she has never witnessed a more dramatic shift in everyday social behavior than what emerges when comparing millennials to the succeeding post-millennial generation in 2012: the exact year when the proportion of Americans who owned smartphones went over 50 percent (Twenge, 2017).

As with many technological innovations and their influence on popular culture, many people fear that smartphones may pose a serious threat to life as they know it. Popular media portrayals of medicine, doctors, and healthcare along with the ubiquitous advertising of pharmaceuticals and other medical remedies, have contributed to the public’s tendency to individualize and

medicalize various types of human behavior in twenty-first century American society citing potential harm to both physical and mental well-being (Callero, 2017, Thompson, et al., 2017). For example, alcoholism, once viewed as a deviant behavior reflecting the lack of self-control, now is widely considered to be a disease identified as alcohol addiction. Likewise, cheating spouses are no longer considered to be immoral philanderers, but are diagnosed as being sex addicts by both amateurs and medical professionals alike. A cursory examination of the list of human behaviors to which the term *addiction* has been applied by the general public, runs the alphabetical gamut from A to Z, ranging from the aforementioned *alcoholism* to *zoophilia* (Thompson and Gibbs, 2017). Yet, the most commonly cited authority on mental disorders, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*, published by the American Psychiatric Association, is more selective, limiting its list of addictions to alcoholism and other drugs while citing gambling addiction as well as some sexual fetishes as being diagnosable mental illnesses (APA, 2013). Nevertheless, many psychologists and psychiatrists have at various times joined the general public and declared that American youth are “addicted” to rock n’ roll, television, video games, the Internet, and now their cellphones, fueling the fears of parents, family members, and policy makers leading to moral panics among the general population (Haenfler, 2016). Perhaps an important question, however, is are people addicted to their smartphones, or have smartphones, like many other technological innovations over time, become such convenient and practical devices that they have become a way of life for a large segment of the population?

The American Psychiatric Association defines addiction as a complex medical condition involving brain disease that is manifested by compulsive substance use despite harmful consequences, and lists the following 11 criteria as symptoms, any three of which may warrant a diagnosis of addiction:

1. Taking the substance in larger amounts or for longer than you meant to
2. Wanting to cut down or stop using the substance but not managing to
3. Spending a lot of time getting, using, or recovering from use of the substance
4. Cravings and urges to use the substance
5. Not managing to do what you should at work, home or school, because of substance use
6. Continuing to use the substance, even when it causes problems in relationships
7. Giving up important social, occupational or recreational activities because of substance use
8. Using substances again and again, even when it puts you in danger
9. Continuing to use, even when you know you have a physical or psychological problem that could have been caused or made worse by the substance
10. Needing more of the substance to get the effect you want (tolerance)
11. Development of withdrawal symptoms, which can be relieved by taking more of the substance (Hartney, 2016).

Today, with technology playing such a prominent role in peoples' lives, we are experiencing widespread concern that people, especially America's youth, are addicted to

computers, video games, and their smartphones. A popular website declares: “58% of men and 47% of women suffer from *Nomophobia*, or the fear of being without a smartphone” (Addictiontips, 2015), and the prestigious Pew Research Center reports that 46 percent of smartphone owners contend that their smartphone is something they “could not live without” (Anderson, 2015). Numerous media sources have jumped on the smartphone addiction bandwagon warning parents, school officials, and others of the potential dangers of smartphone addiction and abuse. Medical doctors are exploring the possibilities of disease resulting from exposure to the radiation produced by cellular phones; while counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists warn of the more social and psychological issues related to the inability to communicate directly with others, interact socially, and the inability to recognize facial expressions associated with fear, anger, excitement, joy, and other emotions (Dawel, et al., 2015). Despite long-standing skepticism of the individualistic approach to human social behavior and the popular tendency to apply the medical model to any and all negatively viewed human activities, social scientists, including sociologists, seem willing to accept the assessment that today’s youth are addicted to technology, especially their smartphones.

This study acknowledges the widespread dependence of society on technology and the strong attachment of people, especially millennials and post-millennials, to their smartphones and other forms of technology. In order to explore cellphone usage among today’s college students and their willingness or unwillingness to forego usage of their phones, a simple study was designed and implemented at a medium-sized regional state university in the southwest.

## Method

During five consecutive long-term semesters (fall and spring) over two academic years, a total of 360 students enrolled in introductory sociology courses were asked to self-report whether they could go without using their phones for a 24-hour period during any or all of the five days in a school week. As an incentive, they would be rewarded 2 bonus points as extra credit in the course for each 24-hour period, and if they could go all five consecutive days without using their phones, they would be awarded five additional bonus points for a total of 15 points. Since it was discovered that almost none of the students wore wristwatches or had alarm clocks, a caveat was included that allowed students to use their phones as clocks only, checking the time and setting alarms. Any other phone usage whatsoever at any time during a 24-hour day would constitute a violation and result in no points for that day. Students who used their phone on Monday, however, could attempt to go the 24 hours of Tuesday without usage and receive points for that day, and so forth throughout the school week.

Participation in the study was voluntary, although not anonymous, and based on the honor system as there was no way to check the validity of the self-report data. When the tally sheets were handed out, several students declined, saying things like “Are you kidding?, I couldn’t go 24 minutes without using my phone much less 24 hours.” Others eagerly grasped the opportunity to earn bonus points with at least one student remarking, “this will be the easiest 15 points I’ve ever earned.” Only two students out of all the classes surveyed indicated that they did not own a cellphone. They were two brothers from Saudi Arabia who jointly had been given



by their parents one cellphone to share for emergency use only while attending the university in the United States. These two students were not included in the data reported in this study.

## **Findings**

At the end of one week, a total of only 60 of the 360 students (16.7%) had gone as much as 24 hours without using their phones. Fifty-two (14.4%) managed to go at least two days or 48 hours during the week without using their phones (although not necessarily consecutively); forty-five (12.5%) went at least three days or 72 hours; twenty-six (7.2%) managed as much as four days (96 hours) and only 16 out of the 360 (4.4%) were able to go five consecutive days (120 hours) sans phones. At first glance, the data seem to indicate that today's college students are indeed addicted to their phones. Even more interesting than the quantitative findings were some of the comments made by students after attempting a week of abstinence from their phones. One girl, who declined to even attempt a day without her phone, said, "you might as well ask me not to breathe for a day." Another girl who attempted each day to not use her phone, commented that it was "like trying not to use her right hand—it's almost like the phone is part of my body." One male student even used the magic word, saying, "I never thought I was addicted to my phone, but when I tried to go without it, I had to admit, I can't do it." Another male, who went three of the five days without using his phone sounded like many alcoholics or drug abusers, commenting "I can take it or leave it [my smartphone], and the only reason I didn't go the entire week without using it was because my parents called one night and my girlfriend called me a couple of times, and I felt like I had to answer."

## Discussion

Although its popular usage may vary, the term *addiction* is a medical one, and technically is a diagnosis that can only be made by doctors trained to do so. However, over the past century, there has been a tendency in American culture to frame previously non-medical phenomena in medical terms. *Medicalization* is a process whereby behaviors, activities, and personal or social problems, previously not linked to health and medicine become viewed from a medical perspective and are now believed to be analogous to disease (Thompson, et al., 2017). This has led to a powerful *medical model ideology* in American culture that views many social issues as being a result of individual pathologies as opposed to being a result of social forces rooted in social structure and organization (Callero, 2017). This ideology tends to frame social issues as being symptoms of larger pathologies in need of a diagnosis that elicits a prognosis as well as prescribed treatment protocols. Hence, the term addiction, a medical affliction, is often applied to non-medical situations such as smartphone usage, or what some people may view as over usage and/or abuse.

Instead of accepting the popular notion and medical model ideology that this predominance in smartphone usage is a form of addiction, the authors contend that this is another example of the first wisdom of sociology: things are not what they seem (Berger, 1963). Rather, a more thorough understanding of this phenomenon may be achieved by placing it in a more traditional sociological framework regarding adaptation to technology and social change. Americans have long been ambivalent about technology, loving the convenience and comforts it provides while being wary of the potential dangers, either real or perceived, that may accompany

the social change incurred (Haenfler, 2016). What brings one individual comfort and convenience can bring another discomfort and trepidation. Almost every technological advancement in the United States has been met in some quarters by resistance, fear, and even moral panics. For example, when the automobile emerged on the scene, while some viewed it as a major development in improving modes of transportation, others saw it as mere folly, and warned of its potentially dire consequences, some of which threatened the very fabric of social life in rural America, prompting some to label it the “devil’s wagon” (Berger, 1979). In fact, perhaps no single technological invention more significantly altered life in rural America than the automobile. While it may be argued that there were some notably negative effects accompanying the social change brought about by the automobile, few would argue that the accompanying revolution in travel was more negative than positive. Before the end of its production, Henry Ford sold 15 million Model Ts. Meanwhile, Chrysler, the Dodge brothers, and General Motors were also manufacturing and selling competing models (Goldstone, 2016). Did the rapid and widespread acceptance and ultimate dependence on automobiles for transportation signify that Americans became *addicted* to their cars? Perhaps. Yet, few social scientists, or any other serious-minded individuals see American’s love affair with and reliance on their automobiles as being a medical affliction. Rather, despite the fact that there are over 253 million automobiles on the road in America (Hirsch, 2014) and approximately 38,000 automobile-related deaths per year in the United States (Ziv, 2016), the automobile is primarily viewed as an important technological invention that made American’s lives easier, broadened people’s social spheres, and essentially made life better. Automobile dealers are hardly viewed

in the same way as drug dealers, and although used car salespeople may be viewed somewhat negatively, someone who identifies with being a “car person” is anything but stigmatized by the masses. In short, in the United States and much of the modern world, owning and driving an automobile (or more than one) is merely a way of life.

Perhaps more closely analogous to the concern associated with smartphones is the invention of the telephone itself, and the accompanying social changes it created. Although several others developed devices for transmitting the human voice, when Alexander Graham Bell famously stated “Watson come here! I want to see you,” a social communication revolution was soon to follow (Coe, 1995). Fear of electrical shock, worries that letter writing might decline (which it did), and a suspected increasing dependence on the convenience provided by talking on the phone led many skeptics to warn that it would be transformed from being primarily a device for short-range important timely communication to a device for the exchange of trivial information and even gossip. Although these negative consequences were realized, over time telephones became a staple in almost every American home and business, and an individual’s telephone number became almost as an important part of a person’s identity as his or her name and address. Did Americans become *addicted* to their telephones? Or, was the technology so convenient, personally satisfying, and in some cases even critical to survival (dial 911 for emergencies), that the phone came to be viewed as a necessity rather than a luxury item, much like automobiles, electricity, microwave ovens, computers, and numerous other technological devices that brought about massive social change? For most people born before 1990 a cellphone was initially viewed as a luxury item, but as the phones became more affordable,

smaller, and more convenient, they soon became valued for their utilitarian value. Portable phones were popular in homes with landlines because the user no longer was tethered to a wire or instrument attached to a permanent location. Cell phones, originally referred to as mobile phones, provided even more freedom and convenience and were a logical technological improvement for a highly mobile population like that of the United States and most countries in Europe. First embraced by the youth subculture it was not long until cellphones became popular with their parents and even grandparents. Even though many adults initially scoffed at carrying and using cellphones, and struggled with the small screens and tiny buttons, they soon became enamored with their convenience and the symbolism that implied they were “hip” or more modern than their counterparts who refused to adapt to the new technology. As one social scientist noted, “Often youth subcultures shine a light on the ‘invisible,’ or taken-for-granted (and often arbitrary) rules, inequalities, and hypocrisies embedded in our relationships and social institutions” (Haenfler, 2016:157). As with most cultural change, younger risk takers are more likely to abandon the accepted traditions and risk the possible stigma attached to trying something different for the potential rewards it might provide in the form of pleasure, convenience, or comfort.

In 2017, it was reported that for the first time in American history, since the telephone had become popular, that there were fewer homes with landlines than ones that were totally dependent on cellphones for telephone communication (Selyukh, 2017). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) noted that it studied telephone usage and the transition from landline usage to dependence on cellphones because its surveys indicated that at least initially,

those who used cellphones were more likely to be involved in higher risk-taking behaviors than those who depended mainly on landline usage (Selyukh, 2017).

Resistance to technology and social change is hardly new, and certainly not unique to the smartphone. When an aspect of material culture changes dramatically, such as the rapid changes brought about by technology, the concurrent lag in normative culture, especially values and norms regarding the use and social acceptance of that technology is inevitable (Weinstein, 2010). For example, early functionalists such as Comte, Spencer, and others borrowed ideas from biologists and developed *evolutionary theories* of social change contending that human society is constantly advancing in somewhat linear fashion with humankind's development resembling "steady ascent up a ladder of predictable stages" (Caplow, 1991:11). Evolutionary theorists viewed change as natural and argued that societies, as well as individuals and groups within any given society, who best adapt to social change will be those that survive and prosper. Functionalists and evolutionists argued that social change typically arose from three different sources: external threats or disturbances, structural responses to differentiation, or scientific discoveries and technological developments (Weinstein, 2010). From a functionalist standpoint, one could argue that people's attachment to and dependence on smartphones represents the evolution of communication from drum beats and smoke signals through the written word and telegraph signals, to the telephone and ultimately the smartphone—a handheld computer that combines oral communication with everything from written communication and mathematical computing to entertainment and social media. In its simplistic form, smartphones can be viewed as highly functional and utilitarian helping to create and maintain social equilibrium and

interdependence of various components of society, most notably all the major social institutions. Try to imagine modern government, family, education, religion, or the economy without smartphones. In short, they have become a way of life.

Karl Marx ([1867] 1967) offered a very different view of social change arguing that changes in the economic infrastructure were the primary impetus for social change. The two major technological innovations alluded to in this paper, the automobile and the telephone, created monumental changes in the economic infrastructure of the United States and other countries, and greatly altered both the means of production and consumption in virtually every capitalistic society. Other *economic theories* of social change challenge the ideology that people are “addicted” to their cellphones and smartphones, illustrating everything from Veblen’s (1899) theory of *conspicuous consumption* to the twenty-first century concept of the *digital divide* which extolls the widespread discrepancy in the access and availability of computer technology, smartphone usage, and social media based on social stratification and social class (Bauerlein, 2011).

Sociologist Robert Putnam (2001) noted that twenty-first century Americans were experiencing a trend toward *neo-tribalism*, movement away from mass society to smaller social networks or tribes. Smartphones and related technologies linked to social media and communication may enhance the feeling of tribalism affording users opportunities to connect and reconnect with new and former social acquaintances and allow them to interact with very little effort or personal exertion on their part. It also seemingly gives them a deeper connection to people albeit face-to-face social interaction is very limited or almost non-existent. Smartphones

and access to social media may paradoxically increase the size of a person's potential social network while limiting the amount of meaningful social interaction to a smaller number of people (McPherson, et al., 2006). Whereas baby boomers did not encounter the internet and smartphones until later in life, Generation X members became acquainted with them in high school, and millennials and post-millennials cannot remember life without them (Twenge, 2017).

Perhaps the sociological theories most directly applicable to the widespread impact of mobile phones, especially smartphones can be found in the *technology theories* that attribute social change to scientific discoveries and technological advancements. W. F. Ogburn's ([1922] 2014) *cultural lag theory* contends that material culture and normative culture do not develop and change at equal rates. Ogburn asserted that changes in technology necessarily produce changes in all other aspects of society and culture ultimately modifying tradition, customs, day-to-day social life and social institutions. For example, the smartphone and social media create a form of *context collapse* that seemingly affords deep connectivity as well as accelerates the speed and increases the volume of communicative exchange (Marvin, 2013). While Baby Boomers and older Americans may view this phenomenon as having negative social consequences, Millennials and post-millennials have never experienced a world where this was not the norm.

Few would argue that the invention of the wheel, gunpowder, printing press, steam engine, internal combustion engine, automobile, telephone, computer, and now the smartphone have not revolutionized society and culture. One can only wonder if earlier societies were concerned about the possibility of "addiction" to the wheel, gunpowder, and reading, as we know



that those concerns surrounded the development of the automobile, telephone, computer, and smartphones.

Some additional remarks from some of the students in this study may support these sociological theories of social change and help explain how smartphones have become a part of everyday life. Keeping in mind that the vast majority of the students in this study were born after 1990 and some even in the twenty-first century, so mobile phones, computers, and other related devices have been a part of their everyday lives almost since birth, their views of smartphones are not much different than Baby Boomers' views of automobiles and telephones in general. These are readily available technologies that make everyday life simpler, more convenient, and more pleasant. Why would they not use them? One of the authors is reminded of the time when he bought his first automobile that had a "luxury package" that included leather seats, sunroof, and electric windows. After the salesperson made a pitch for the convenience of these accessories, trying to get the dealer to reduce the asking price because he thought several of these options were frivolous and unnecessary, the author commented, "the day I can't reach over and roll up or down a car window is the day that somebody should take away my keys." Since that time, the author has purchased at least half a dozen new automobiles with electric windows, and would not even consider owning a vehicle that was not equipped with such a *necessary* feature. The same can be said for electric garage door openers, climate control, automatically adjustable seats, and navigation systems. All of these items once viewed as exotic accessories, are now deemed as necessary by many, and come as standard equipment on most automobiles. Perhaps critics of popular culture could argue that this is a sign that the consumer is *addicted* to

these features, but it might be more reasonably argued that they merely reflect adaptation to the social and cultural change that has transpired over the past century when automobiles went from being viewed as a way to get from point A to point B, to now being viewed as part of a person's social identity.

Smart phones are certainly more than just a way to talk to one another. In fact, many young users of smartphones rarely talk on them at all. Rather, they are continuously searching the internet, snap chatting, texting, instagramming and using their smartphone in a variety of other practical ways that they view as not necessarily enhancing, but just carrying out the routines of their everyday lives. One student summed up what many of the students echoed by saying,

I know it's just a phone, but it's also more than that. It's almost like it's a part of me. It connects me to my family and my friends. I also use it to deposit checks, pay my bills, and keep track of what's going on in the world. It's not that I feel like I must have it, it's just that I do have it, so why in the world wouldn't I use it?

Smartphone usage today may be a byproduct of innovation and technological change that some members of society, especially those from earlier generations may not fully understand. The issues explored in this study deserve further scientific attention and more sophisticated research. Moreover, as advancements in smartphones, related social media, and other technological advancements that can only be imagined today arise, even more sociological questions and issues will emerge to be explored through further, more systematic and scientific research.

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